

A Literary Analysis of Jesus and False Prophets in the Gospel of Matthew



Scripture Statement: Jesus castigates the religious leaders as false prophets because of their rejection of Him as the Messiah and of their ethical behavior.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24.

As one approaches a study of false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew, one must approach this research with a view of the whole of Matthew's Gospel, not three isolated passages separated from context. Since many Christian journals cite these three Scriptures to justify their separation from other Christians, it is necessary to examine the whole of Matthew's Gospel in order to understand correctly the ones to whom Jesus referred to in His warning and condemnation. How should one approach the three references to "false prophets" in the Gospel of Matthew? Should one apply this phrase to anyone who does not agree with one's interpretation of Scriptures relating to a so-called worship service. If one, for instance, employs instrumental music in the corporate worship service, is it proper to employ this terminology (false prophets/teachers) against this person? If one employs individual communion cups in the Lord's Supper, is it correct to make use of this epithet in opposition to one who refuses to use the common cup (one container) in the distribution of the fruit of the vine?

Is one a false teacher if he or she does not condemn the use of a fellowship hall connected to the so-called church building? Is one a false teacher if one uses wine in the Lord's Supper? The list is almost *ad infinitum*, that is, without end. Christians must learn to reevaluate and reinterpret the traditions passed on from godly men and women in their efforts to be true to the Word of God. Many Christians are so used to interpreting the Scriptures as they have been taught that they do not reexamine the Scriptures to see if the founding fathers correctly applied God's Word to their beliefs. Mark Allen Powell is correct in his succinct statement about the necessity of utilizing narrative criticism to lend a hand in applying the Scriptures more accurately in his or her search for accurate knowledge. Listen to him as he cuts away the underbrush to get to the text:

Any hermeneutic that locates revelation primarily in the past is inevitably pessimistic. The very passing of time, which is definitive of history, distances us from the significant event and places us at an ever-greater disadvantage. The

sentiment that accompanies such a perspective is the suspicion that we are missing something: if only we had been there, we would understand better. The hermeneutic that undergirds narrative criticism challenges this prejudice. Revelation is given through the story, which remains with us today. We are, in fact, in a privileged position, for the story interprets the events for us in ways that we might never have grasped if we had simply been there to witness them transpire in history.^[1]

LITERARY CRITICISM

Before analyzing the three texts concerning “false prophets” in the Gospel of Matthew, it is necessary to review the techniques employed by him as one seeks to unravel the meaning behind this phrase that is so loosely employed by many sincere Christians today. This essay details the three major divisions in the Gospel of Matthew in order to comprehend more clearly as to who the false prophets are that Jesus warns His disciples about. The phrase “false prophet” is employed from Matthew's Gospel in order to justify separation from other believers when viewpoints do not agree. To accomplish this objective of identification of the false prophets, then literary techniques are employed to capture the conflict that envelops the whole of Matthew's Gospel. This overall analysis of the principles of literary interpretation should assist one in identifying the false prophets in the three different occurrences of the phrase by Jesus. The identity of Jesus is the focal point of all three major sections in Matthew. This study draws attention to the various viewpoints espoused by God, and the civil/religious leaders in Israel. This critical analysis reveals that unethical behavior and a denial that Jesus is the Son of God calls forth the epithet “false prophets.”

Since God's revelation is given in story form to His people, this form of communication enables them to arrive at a more precise identification of false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew. One can read the narrative by Matthew and follow the plot for an accurate description of the misleading instructors.^[2] This detailed study is an overview of the Gospel from a literary perspective. This literary exploration explores the principles of exposition through the means of narrative investigation. Literary criticism controls the looseness that is frequently employed in the investigation of a solitary phrase.^[3]

Literary criticism recognizes that a single text or multiple texts are a part of a larger whole. The three occurrences of “false prophets” in the Gospel of Matthew^[4] can be properly exegeted when they are considered fragments of a continuous composition. Hayes and Holladay have correctly stated: “In attempting to understand a particular text, the exegete should seek to see the text within the structure of the major context as well as within the structure of the sub-units.”^[5] When the reader poses questions about the literary placement of certain passages, he or she is able to arrive at certain conclusions that might otherwise be missed. Literary analysis of a text helps one to focus more closely upon the individual texts. This form of interpretation assists one in grasping more fully the intent of the author.

This philosophy of interpretation dealing with the complete text is thoroughly worked out by Mark Allen Powell in his study guide on narrative criticism.^[6] He points out justly so that “Literary criticism focuses on the finished form of the text.”^[7] Again,

Powell states the matter even more firmly, "Literary analysis does not dissect the text but discerns the connecting threads that hold it together."^[8] Dissecting the text from its context contributes often times to an improper application of the text.^[9] The goal of literary criticism is to read the text as the *implied reader*^[10] read the text.

The Implied Reader

The *implied reader* may know things that are not in the text. But, on the other hand, the *real reader* frequently consults outside reading in order to understand the text more fully.^[11] Seymour Chatman in drawing attention to the meaning of the *implied reader* puts it this way: "The counterpart of the implied author is the *implied reader*—not the flesh-and-bones you or I sitting in our living rooms reading the book, but the audience presupposed by the narrative itself."^[12] Narrative criticism helps to narrow the gap between the *real reader* and the *implied reader*.^[13] This treatise is a narrative construction of Matthew's Gospel in order to try to comprehend as clearly as possible the discernment of the *implied reader* (original reader) as to who the false prophets are in the Gospel of Matthew.

Plot

As one begins to read the narrative penned by Matthew, one is immediately made aware that there is a plot. Whenever one has a plot, one has a story.^[14] Chatman defines story as consisting of two parts—story and discourse.^[15] For Chatman story has to do with a chain of events (actions, happenings) whereas discourse is the means by which the story (content) is communicated.^[16] Jack Kingsbury, adopting the definition of Chatman, applies this concept to the story of Matthew's narrative by demonstrating that "The 'story' of Matthew is of the life of Jesus from conception and birth to death and resurrection."^[17] On the other hand, Kingsbury in his differentiation between story and discourse says, "The 'discourse' of Matthew is the means whereby this story of Jesus' life is told."^[18] In other words, the story is *what* is told whereas discourse is *how* the story is told.^[19] E. M. Forster as early as 1927 says, "a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence."^[20] This arrangement of events is self-evident when one looks at the Gospel of Matthew as story.

Chatman also describes a story as consisting of three parts—events, characters, and settings.^[21] The events are the strings of movements that stretch out from the beginning to the end of the story; in other words, the events cover the whole distance of the report. One dominant trait in Matthew is the reporting of conflict (events) between Jesus and the religious leaders. It is these events that comprise the plot, or flow, of the narration. An understanding of plot can deepen one's understanding of who the false prophets were in the Gospel of Matthew. Morner and Rausch thoughtfully define plot as

The careful arrangement by an author of INCIDENTS in a NARRATIVE to achieve a desired effect. Plot is more than simply the series of happenings in a literary work. It is the result of the writer's deliberate selection of interrelated actions (what happens) and choice of arrangement (the order of happening) in

presenting and resolving a CONFLICT.^[22]

One cannot read Matthew's story^[23] and not observe his choice of arrangements in presenting his story of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Matthew foreshadows the hostility between Jesus and the leaders of Israel in his first section (**1:1—4:16**); next, he describes indirect collision (**4:17—11:1**); then he pictures direct confrontation (**11:2—16:20**); and, finally the friction is resolved in the crucifixion of Jesus (**16:21—28:20**). An understanding of plot (sequence of events) facilitates comprehension of the whole. There is a difference between story and plot. Forster's comments on this distinction are worthy of citation.

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died, and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it.^[24]

In the development of plot, one recognizes the translating of characters into action.^[25] In the plot of Matthew's story, conflict exists between two opposing forces—Jesus and the religious leaders. Matthew's plot structure begins with exposition (important background information), and then develops the build-up of tension between opposing forces and finally the plot arrangement reaches a climax in its resolution of the conflict—the death of Jesus.^[26] In narrative writing, there is a beginning, middle, and end to plot.^[27]

Point of View

In examining plot in Matthew's story, one is immediately confronted with various evaluative points of view about the identity of Jesus.^[28] "The notion of point of view is a pervasive one in narrative criticism," says Powell.^[29] There is a contrast in the Book of Matthew between God's point of view and the religious leaders' point of view concerning the identity of Jesus. One also observes other points of view concerning the crowds. If one's point of view does not harmonize with God's point of view as revealed in **Matthew 3:17** and **17:5**, then that individual is not thinking the things of God, but rather the things of men (**16:23**).^[30]

As one peruses the Book of Matthew, one cannot help but observe various points-of-view about Jesus?^[31] One encounters Matthew's point of view about Jesus in the prologue (**chapters 1 and 2**). Also in the prologue, Matthew gives a foretaste of the religious leaders' point-of-view about Jesus.^[32] Following the baptism of Jesus, Matthew reveals God's point-of-view about who Jesus really is. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, one is confronted over and over with various points of view as to who Jesus really is.

As one moves from the disciples to the Jewish crowds and then to the religious leaders, one observes the degree to which each group deviates from thinking the things of God to thinking the things of men. Matthew records one such example in which one of

the disciples did not think the things of God. For instance, he informs his readers that as Jesus begins His journey to Jerusalem to die for the sins of mankind that He rebukes Peter for not having in mind the thinking of God. Matthew records this encounter: “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men’” (16:23). In other words, Peter did not think the things of God concerning the necessity of the atonement, but rather the things of men in his seeking to prevent God’s purpose for the salvation of mankind through the sacrificial offering of Jesus for the sins of the world.

One purpose of this article is to investigate the various viewpoints set forth by the numerous characters in the Gospel of Matthew to see how well the characters’ points of view coincides with that of God’s. In order to accomplish this target, it is necessary to cover briefly the structure of Matthew’s history of salvation. This study will reveal that the religious leaders’ point of view were in direct opposition to God’s point of view. This rejection of God’s point of view by the leaders of Israel called forth from Jesus the epithet—false prophets.

THE STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW’S HISTORY OF SALVATION

Three Major Divisions in Matthew

There are three broad segments in Matthew’s Gospel.^[33] The three segments are: (1) The unveiling of Jesus’ identity [1:1—4:16];^[34] (2) The ministry of Jesus to Israel and Israel’s repudiation of Jesus [4:17—16:20];^[35] and (3) The pilgrimage of Jesus to Jerusalem, which also includes an account of His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection [16:21—28:20].^[36] It appears that Matthew employs a formula to signal the beginning of each new part. For example, he says, following the end of segment one: “From that time on Jesus began to preach” (4:17) and with the beginning of section three: “From that time on Jesus began to explain” (16:21). Did Matthew intend to call attention to important turns in his story? If so, this gives rise to the above outline.^[37]

It seems appropriate to analyze the Book of Matthew from the perspective of three major divisions to more clearly grasp the development of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. Even if this division is not the real intent of Matthew, nevertheless, this three-part partition can still assist one in understanding the Word of God more clearly. As the reader advances through the three groupings, it will become apparent that there is progression in the story of Jesus. In the first part (1:1—4:16), Matthew foreshadows^[38] the conflict with the religious leaders who are also called false prophets in 7:15. In Part Two (4:17—16:20) the conflict with the religious leaders begin, but with Part Three (16:21—28:20) the confrontation with the religious leaders escalates to the point of their putting Him to death (26:57-67; 27:32-55).^[39]

FIRST MAJOR SECTION: 1:1—4:16

The aim of this first section is to “present Jesus to the reader so that he/she will know throughout the rest of the story precisely who Jesus is.”^[40] As one approaches this first section (1:1—4:16), there does appear to be literary unity from beginning to end. For example, consider the following scenario that testifies to the unity of 1:1—4:16. For

instance, the formula quotation in [Matthew 2:23](#) is linked to the formula quotation in [4:12-16](#) through the naming of the geographical location of His ministry:

- “And he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene’” ([2:23](#)).
- “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” ([4:12-16](#)).

Again, Matthew informs us that Joseph took Jesus to Egypt,

- “Where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” ([2:15](#)).

These three citations ([2:23](#); [4:12-16](#); [2:15](#)) along with the baptismal declaration ([3:17](#)) declare the unity of [1:1—4:16](#). The baptismal declaration reads: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” This passage ([3:17](#)) is foreshadowed by the prophecy in [2:15](#). Also, [4:12-16](#) is reflective of the fulfillment prediction in [2:23](#). The identity of Jesus also acts as glue that gives cohesion to Part One. This section ([1:1—4:16](#)) also foreshadows the false prophets that Jesus addresses in His Sermon on the Mount as well as His eschatological discourse ([Chapter 24](#)).

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

God’s Evaluative Point of View

In this first section ([1:1—4:16](#)), Matthew unveils Jesus’ identity. In this division, one finds the most climatic statement regarding the identity of Jesus. The ultimate declaration as to the identity of Jesus is from God in the baptismal scene of Jesus: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” ([3:17](#)). In this baptismal pericope, God personally enters the world of Matthew’s story and declares Jesus to be His Son in whom He is pleased.^[41] God in making this declaration expresses His evaluative point of view concerning Jesus’ real identity, that is to say, how He thinks about Jesus. For one to trace properly the flow of Matthew’s story from beginning to end, one must consider the first part as a major contribution to the unfolding of the Jesus drama. Before developing God’s evaluative point of view in more detail, it will be helpful to consider other points of view about Jesus in this first segment.

Matthew’s Evaluative Point of View

Matthew’s point of view is that Jesus is the Son of God.^[42] For example, in the

prologue, Matthew sets the tone for the development of the real identity of Jesus—Jesus is the Son of God. To illustrate, Matthew, after revealing the angel’s announcement of the birth of Jesus, adds his own comments, which reveals his own point of view:

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us” (1:21-23).

Matthew reveals his point of view about Jesus by citing the virgin birth prophecy (Isaiah 7:14). This reference also discloses God’s hand in the scheme of redemption for sinful man. Since Jesus is the supreme player, Matthew immediately advances the Davidic and Messiah-King claims through the genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17). Matthew lets us know that God has guided the whole of Israel’s history in the promises He made to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-9)^[43] and David (Isaiah 11:1). Matthew informs his readers that even in the face of the Babylonian captivity (Matthew 1:12) God was still in control. Since Jesus as the Messiah is the heir of Abraham and David, Matthew begins his Gospel by calling attention to this truth: “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). It is also significant that in this genealogy, Matthew combines the name Jesus with the name Christ. The name Jesus Christ (1:1, 21) also makes known God’s point of view as well as Matthew’s point of view.

The name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς, Ihsous, “Jehovah is Salvation”) is descriptive of His mission. On the other hand, the term Christ (Χριστός, Cristos, “Anointed”) is descriptive of His being appointed by the Father. Since Matthew gives the personal name of the Messiah (Μεσσίας, Messias) as Jesus (1:16), the reader should give special attention to the importance of this name. This name assigned to Jesus is of heavenly origin. Matthew informs us that an angel of God instructed Joseph to name Him Jesus (1:20-21). Matthew chronicles Joseph’s response to the angel: “He gave him the name Jesus” (1:25). Matthew sounds the identity of Jesus through the genealogy of names and the titles placed at the beginning of his account.

In the name Jesus, one discovers that God is active in Him for the salvation of mankind. Matthew not only refers to the one born in Bethlehem as Jesus, but he also adds the title Christ for further identification. Christ is the title of Jesus, not his name. Among all the titles assigned to Jesus, Christ is the most general. Matthew not only affirms in 1:1 that Jesus is the Christ, or Messiah—a confession that Peter will later make (16:16)—but also that he is “Son of David” and “Son of Abraham.”

Matthew includes the genealogy to assert that God has guided the whole of Israel’s history so that it might culminate in the birth of Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham. Thus, Matthew in this first section (1:1—4:16) sets forth his evaluative point of view as to who Jesus really is. From the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew informs us that Jesus is Christ, and, then concludes the final chapter of Christ’s rejection of Israel’s leaders by recording Pilate’s question to the chief priest and elders (27:20): “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked” (27:22). Even the high priest in Jesus’ final hours asked Him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God” (26:63). Did Jesus

refuse to answer the high priest because He knew that his question was not sincere? Observe the contrast between the Magi and the religious leaders—the Magi worshipped Him, but the religious leaders cried out: “Crucify him!” (27:22).

The Magi’s Evaluative Point of View About Jesus

Following the birth of Jesus, the Magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem and inquired about Him who is “born King of the Jews” (2:2). This phrase, “king of the Jews,” sets forth the evaluative point of view of the Magi concerning Jesus’ identity.^[44] In fact, the rest of 2:2 reads: “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” Immediately, in Matthew’s story, one quickly observes the contrast between Herod and the Magi. The Magi’s evaluative point of view is in harmony with God’s evaluative point of view. Matthew begins his Gospel with a reference to Jesus as “king of the Jews” and concludes the passion narrative with a reference to Jesus as the “king of the Jews” (27:37).

When Jesus was brought before Pilate, he inquired of Him to tell him if he were the “king of the Jews.” Matthew records Pilate’s question and Jesus’ answer: “Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied” (27:11). Jesus response reinforces the response of the Magi. Again, in the closing scene of Jesus’ crucifixion, one finds this name over the cross: “Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (27:37).

Herod and the Religious Leaders’ Point of View

Herod’s evaluative point of view is not in harmony with God’s. To illustrate Herod’s point of view, it is necessary to turn to Matthew’s prologue to observe his actions about learning of the birth of Jesus. Matthew says, “When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill Him” (2:13). Herod and the religious leaders are closely tied together in this story. Matthew sets the stage for the further development of the animosity of the leaders against Jesus.

In this First Section (1:1—4:16), Matthew foreshadows the rejection of Jesus by the “chief priests and the teachers [scribes] of the law” (2:4) when they do not respond to what they know to be true. When Herod inquired of them as to where the Christ should be born, they responded correctly, but did not act on that knowledge: “‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written’” (2:5). Matthew suggests beforehand the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders that will ultimately end in His death. As Jesus completes His ministry to Israel, He forewarns his disciples about the clandestine operation of the religious leaders: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (16:21).

Again, Matthew reveals Jesus’ prediction about His death by the leaders of Israel: “When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be

betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.’ And the disciples were filled with grief” (17:22-23). Finally, for the third time, Jesus reveals the evaluative point of view of the leaders in that He once more makes known their intent to destroy Him: “Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ‘We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!’” (20:17-19).

As Matthew concludes his Gospel, he draws attention to the religious leaders (referred to as false prophets in 7:15 and 24:11,24) in their final outrage against Him.

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him (27:41-44).

“He saved others” is reflective of 1:21; “He’s the King of Israel” is reflective of 2:2; and “I am the Son of God” is reflective of 3:17. The chief priest, the teachers of the law, nor the elders had the mind of God in their conception of Jesus.

John the Baptist’s Evaluative Point of View

John the Baptist’s evaluative point of view is revealed in his confrontation with the religious leaders (Matthew 3:7-12).^[45] For example, Matthew captures John’s graphic prediction of the Coming One in glowing terms: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (3:11-12). The chaff represents the religious leaders (false prophets) who did not share God’s evaluative point of view.

Satan’s Evaluative Point of View

Following the baptismal scenario, even Satan acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God:

- The tempter came to him and said, “If (εἰς, ei) you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread” (4:3).
- Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If (εἰς, ei) you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down” (4:5-6).

In the Greek New Testament there are many kinds of conditional statements. There are four classes of conditional sentences that are outstanding in usage. The first class condition, the one employed by Satan, affirms the reality of the condition. It is expressed by εἰς (ei, “if”) with the indicative mood in the protasis (“if” clause) and almost

any mood or tense in the apodosis (main or fulfillment clause). This interpretation is required according to Greek syntax. Whenever the indicative with *ei* (“if” clause) is employed instead of the subjunctive with *εἰαὶ* (ean, “if” clause), then, one must assume the truth of the protasis (“if” clause). This construction confirms the condition and is best translated “Since you are the Son of God.” Satan expresses God’s point of view about Jesus, but he did not possess God’s point of view about Jesus’ purpose in coming (4:1-11). He did not think the things of God. It is in this vein that our Lord rebuked Peter for not having the mind of God concerning His death upon the cross (16:21-23).

Peter’s Evaluative Point of View

Peter’s evaluation of Jesus in 16:13-20 reflects God’s evaluative point of view in 3:17. Matthew highlights God’s point of view in the baptismal scene of Jesus. Apart from Matthew’s introduction—“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John” [3:13]—one observes a dialogue between John and Jesus (3:14-15) and two revelatory events that follow (3:16-17). Following the baptism of Jesus, one hears the voice of God: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” (3:17). As stated above, after this acknowledgement by God, Matthew records Jesus’ encounter with Satan (4:1-11). It is quite evident that Satan did not deny what God stated, but he did not think the things of God. In other words, he sought to undermine God’s way of redemption. Later in Matthew’s story (16:21—28:20) when Peter tried to prevent the atonement, Jesus rebuked him, because, he, too, did not think the things of God: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (16:23). Surely, the implied reader must have reflected back upon the temptation scene of Jesus (4:1-12).

But Peter, prior to this rebuke, confessed the mind of God: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). Following this confession Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (16:17). This statement by Jesus is also reminiscent of the baptismal scene in which God publicly declared Jesus to be His Son (3:17). Immediately after Jesus reveals His death, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John into the Mount of Transfiguration. Once more, God enters the world of man and proclaims: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (17:5).

SECOND MAJOR SECTION: 4:17—16:20

Following Matthew’s introduction to Jesus as Messiah (1:1—4:16), he embarks upon Jesus’ ministry to the nation of Israel (4:17—11:1).^[46] Matthew calls attention to Jesus’ ministry with three passages that focus upon His teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23; 9:35; 11:1). Just as John began his ministry with a call to repentance, so did Jesus: “From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (4:17). Jesus viewed the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). The leaders of Israel (false prophets) had become evil. This evil caused Jesus to respond with: “You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (12:34). This statement of Jesus is also an echo of John’s denunciation of the Pharisees and Sadducees who approached John: “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to

where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (3:7-8).

JESUS’ MINISTRY TO ISRAEL: 4:17—11:1

Jesus’ Teaching Ministry to Israel

In Jesus’ ministry to Israel, He rebukes the religious leaders for their refusal to discern the will of God for their lives (5:20), and He also summons the crowds to repent and believe the Gospel (4:17; 4:23; 9:35; 11:1). After Jesus learns of John’s imprisonment, He returns to Galilee to continue His ministry to Israel (4:12). Later He leaves Nazareth and lives in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali (4:12-13). During this period of time, He proclaims the good news that the kingdom of heaven is near (4:17). On one occasion as Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, He calls Simon Peter and Andrew (brother of Peter) to follow Him (4:18-20); shortly thereafter, He also invites two other brothers (James and John) to follow Him (4:21-22). Following a number of miracles by Jesus (see chapters 8 and 9), Jesus calls Matthew to become one of His disciples (9:9-13). Then, in chapter 10, Matthew informs us that He calls all of His disciples unto Himself (10:1-4).

Following the call of His disciples, Matthew informs his readers that Jesus went throughout Galilee “Teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (4:23). It is significant that Matthew repeats these three activities in 9:35 and 11:1. The third summary of Jesus’ ministry only mentions two of the three deeds.

Matthew 4:23	Matthew 9:35	Matthew 11:1
Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.	Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.	After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

As a result of these activities, His fame spread throughout Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan (4:25). His healing ministry quickly spread all over Syria (4:24), and as a result of this healing ministry people flocked from all over the area to be healed. Matthew reports the events with these words:

News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him (4:24-25).

Immediately following this healing ministry, Jesus saw the crowds that accompanied Him and He went up on a mountain and began to teach His disciples (5:1—

7:28). If one wants to understand what He taught (**4:23**), then one must read the Sermon on the Mount. In this Sermon, Jesus taught His disciples that repentance involves a call to responsibility. This Sermon is a direct refutation of the teachings and practices of the religious leaders (**5:17-20**). Following this teaching, Matthew gives a comment that is rather striking: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (**7:28-29**). Just as in the first section of Matthew’s story (**1:1—4:16**), the reader is once again alerted to the hypocrisy of the leaders of Israel. The battle is about to begin but does not really take hold with increased momentum until **chapter 12**.

This battle of friction was suggested beforehand in His exhortation concerning impending persecution by the religious leaders (**5:10-13**) whom He later described as false prophets (**7:15**). After the Beatitudes, Jesus further warns the disciples about inner motives for right behavior. Again Jesus alerts His listeners to the religious leaders: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (**5:20**). This statement by Jesus echoes John’s renunciation of the Pharisees (**3:7**) and the complicity of the teachers of the law with Herod (**2:4**).

Jesus, following His reference to the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (scribes), pinpoints some of their teachings (**5:21-48**) and acts of piety (**6:1-18**). In calling attention to their teachings, He says, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago” (**5:21a**), “But I tell you” (**5:22**). Jesus is not contradicting the law, but rather He is setting forth the true interpretation of the law. He is not nullifying the law; that is to say, He is not setting aside the requirements of the law. If Jesus is abolishing the law as advocated by many Christians, then this interpretation contradicts Jesus’ earlier statement:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (**5:17-19**).^[47]

Jesus’ Healing Ministry to Israel

Jesus’ ministry to Israel not only includes teaching, but His ministry also reached out to those that were sick physically (**8:1—9:38**). With the healing ministry of Jesus, Matthew’s readers are being prepared for the beginning of hostilities against Jesus. The skirmishes against Jesus are foreshadowed in the first part of Matthew’s story (**1:1—4:16**) and also Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount foretells the confrontations (**5:10-12**). After coming down from the mountain, Jesus engages in a healing ministry (**chapters 8 and 9** record ten miracles). Matthew makes known that Jesus heals a leper (**8:1-4**), restores a paralyzed servant of a centurion (**8:5-13**), cures Peter’s mother-in-law (**8:14-15**), and, later that evening, He casts out demons and heals all the sick (**8:16-17**). Not only does Matthew record therapeutic miracles, but he also tells about a non-therapeutic miracle,

namely, the calming of the winds and the waves of the sea (8:23-27). Following the non-therapeutic miracle, Matthew discloses the healing of two demon-possessed men (8:28-34).

After these healings, Jesus entered a boat and returned to His own town (9:1). Upon His arrival, men of the city brought a paralytic to Him (9:2a). Instead of telling him to get up, Jesus simply says, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven” (9:2b). Matthew now introduces his readers to an indirect confrontation with Jesus by the teachers of the law. Again, one is reminded of the words of Jesus following His evaluation of the ethical behavior and teachings of the religious leaders: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (7:15). These teachers of the law do not openly confront Him about His statement on forgiveness, but as Matthew says, “At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, ‘This fellow is blaspheming!’” (9:3). Suddenly in this **ninth chapter**, one witnesses conflict as it materializes. To illustrate, one should observe Matthew’s telling of the story. He says that Jesus, “knowing their thoughts,” said to them:

“Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....” Then he said to the paralytic, “Get up, take your mat and go home.” And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men (9:4-8).

Not only does the second section (4:17—16:20) of Part One (4:17-11:1) emphasize Jesus’ ministry to Israel, but it also emphasizes the disciples’ ministry to Israel. Jesus sends the twelve out to “Preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons” (10:7-8). Conspicuously absent is the command to teach. They were to perform, at least from the context, two aspects of ministry: (1) proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is near, and (2) perform miracles of healing.

Next in **chapter 10**, one beholds bitter, antagonistic conflict on the horizon. By the end of this second discourse (the charge to the Apostles), one senses the trend toward warlike conflict toward Jesus by the religious leaders. In this **chapter (10)**, Jesus again cautions them about the religious leaders as He did in the Sermon on the Mount (7:15). He says, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (10:16). He also warns them to “Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues” (10:17). Jesus had earlier warned them about the reaction of people in general as well as the dangers of the religious leaders.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (5:10-12).

Jesus' Preaching Ministry to Israel

As stated earlier, Jesus “went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (4:23). In 4:17, Matthew reports Jesus as saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” It is through this proclamation that Jews and Gentiles alike will be enjoined upon to decision. The question is: Will they repent and become followers of Jesus and enter the sphere of God’s gracious Rule, or will they refuse to enter God’s kingdom and live in the sphere of Satan’s Rules?

What does the “kingdom of heaven” mean? Does not this phrase simply call attention to the truth that God rules? Is the kingdom of heaven equivalent to someone saying the Rule of God, or God reigns? When John said, “the kingdom of heaven is near” (3:2), did he not denote that the kingdom is coming near, or is approaching? John, Jesus, and the Apostles were advancing the concept that God has drawn near. For Matthew, God draws near in the person of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God. Matthew reports that “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, ‘God with us’” (1:23). And in 12:28, Matthew states Jesus’ announcement: “if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

The Gospel of the kingdom is about Jesus Messiah, the Son of God. The Gospel of the kingdom is clear: it is the Good News about God’s way of salvation that is revealed in Jesus. The Gospel is that which the angel announces to Joseph: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). The Gospel is simply Good News about God’s way of salvation by grace through Jesus. Jesus sums up this good news in a conversation with Nicodemus:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God (John 3:16-21).

THE ELEMENT OF CONFLICT IN 4:17—11:1

The element of conflict does not dominate 4:17—11:1 (part “A”) as it does in 11:2—16:20 (part “B”). Part “A” of the second major section focuses more on the teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23; 9:35; 11:1) than it does on the friction between Jesus and the scrupulous leaders. Nevertheless, the reader still reads of hostility between Jesus and the religious leaders; in part “A” the reader is alerted to disunity between Jesus and the religious leaders in His healing of the paralytic (9:1-8). In this first section, one is led to count on battle. In 4:17—8:34 Matthew forewarns the reader that he is to anticipate

conflict. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount warns the disciples about persecution (**5:10-12**), and He also describes the righteousness that falls short of what is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven (**5:20**).

Jesus in His now-famous Sermon speaks of the acts of piety performed by religious leaders as being hypocritical in nature (**6:1-18**). Following this rebuke of the rigid leaders' motives, then Matthew concludes the Sermon on the Mount with: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (**7:28-29**). Finally, Matthew records Jesus' admiration of the centurion's faith (**8:5-10**) versus the lack of faith on the part of the leaders: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (**8:11-12**).

Now in **chapter 9**, the conflict that the readers have been led to anticipate shows its ugly face. It has now materialized; it is here, not in full bloom, but in bud. This conflict is not direct but indirect. Matthew carefully reveals that the charges brought against Him, following the healing of a paralytic, were indirect: "At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, 'This fellow is blaspheming!'" (**9:3**). They declare "to themselves," says Matthew. Following the call of Matthew into discipleship, the religious leaders observed Jesus having dinner with tax collectors and sinners in Matthew's home (**9:9-10**). The Pharisees objected to Jesus' behavior, but they did not question Jesus directly about His behavior but rather His disciples (**9:11**).

In **Chapter 10**, Jesus summons His disciples and delivers to them His missionary charge (**10:1-15**). In the conclusion of this missionary charge, Jesus immediately forewarns them of irreconcilable conflict between themselves and the people (**10:16-39**). Just as Jesus had warned them about false prophets (religious leaders) in the Sermon on the Mount (**7:15**), now Jesus warns them about "wolves" (the people) in His sending them out to preach the message of kingdom of God (**10:7,8,16**).^[48]

In the first major section (**4:1—4:16**), Matthew presents Jesus as the main character of his story. He demonstrates that Jesus is aligned with God as His authoritative Son (**3:17**). Matthew discloses two evaluative points of view that forcefully stand out in this first section; namely, God's point of view that Jesus is His Son (**3:17**) and Satan's challenge to Jesus in this capacity (**4:3, 6**).^[49] The secular and religious leaders in this part of the story are characterized as evil. Their evaluative point of view is an observation that is at odds with God's declaration. The religious leaders are not only set forth as aligned with Herod (**2:1-6**), but they are also set in opposition to John the Baptist who is supportive of Jesus (**3:7-12**).^[50] In this first section, one comes away with the recognition that neither Jesus nor the religious leaders are aware of each other. But, in spite of this lack of awareness, one, upon a closer reading, immediately grasps that the leaders' threat to Jesus is foreshadowed through Herod's plot to kill Jesus (**2:3-6**). Also one immediately grasps Jesus' eschatological judgment (**Matthew 24 and 25**) as foreshadowed through the prophecy of John the Baptist:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from

the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (3:7-12).

As stated above, the second major section (4:17—16:20) of Matthew’s story divides itself into two segments (4:17—11:1 and 11:2—16:20). The first division (part A), in this second major section, focuses on the ministry of Jesus to Israel and the second division’s (part B) central point is on Israel’s repudiation of Jesus. In the first division of this second section, Matthew’s controlling emphasis appears to be Jesus’ ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23; 9:35; 11:1), rather than on the element of clash between Jesus and Israel (leaders and the people), though this element is still present. In this first section (part A) Jesus calls Israel to repentance and announces the Kingdom of Heaven (4:17). But in this second section (11:2—16:20) of the second major division (4:17—16:20), one observes Jesus’ anguish of Israel’s negative response to Jesus’ call of repentance (11:16-19). In concluding this section about Jesus’ ministry to Israel, one should observe that Matthew prepares the reader for the conflict that is about to begin.

ESCALATION OF CONFLICT BETWEEN JESUS AND THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN 11:1—16:20

In part “B” of the second major section, the leaders’ threat to kill Jesus escalates to the point of their plotting to rid themselves of Him (12:14). This plot is foreshadowed by their accusation of blasphemy in 9:3. But in this latter half (part B) of the second part of Matthew’s story, one observes an escalation of conflict. The religious leaders’ hostilities are no longer secretive (9:1-8), but their ill will is now one of direct confrontation over the disciples’ picking heads of grain on the Sabbath (12:2-8). Following this showdown, the Pharisees followed Him into *their* synagogues (12:9) seeking to find something to accuse Him of (12:10). The leaders are no longer hesitant to speak to Him directly. To illustrate consider the following encounters:

Matthew 12:9-10	Matthew 12:38
Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”	Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.”

Also, the leaders do not mind criticizing His disciples to His face.

Matthew 12:2	Matthew 15:1-2

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.”	Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

In this second subdivision (part B), one observes the intensity of controversy. Prior to this level of antagonism, interaction was to some extent avoided. But now controversy saturates this section. This is the pattern one detects in **12:2-8, 9-14, 38-45; 15:1-9**. This passion of hatred is so great against Jesus that the religious leaders seek His life. Matthew captures this intense dislike with these words: “The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus” (**12:14**). In this direct confrontation with Jesus, He twice speaks of eschatological judgment against these leaders (**12:22-37, 38-45**). Jesus speaks of judgment when they accuse Him of doing His miracles through the prince of demons (Beelzebub); second, He speaks of judgment when they refuse to believe and request another sign.

Jesus and Beelzebub Matthew 12:36-37	The Sign of Jonah Matthew 12:41-42
But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.	The men of Nineveh will stand up <u>at the judgment</u> with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.

These two judgments foreshadow the eschatological judgment that Jesus elaborates in **Matthew 24 and 25**. This judgment is the same “coming wrath” that John the Baptist forewarned the religious leaders about when they came to him for baptism (**3:7-12**): “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (**3:12**). Jesus again alludes to this judgment in the Parable of the Weeds (**13:36-43**):

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (**13:40-43**).

As stated above, the religious leaders’ opposition with Jesus escalates. Following the attack against Jesus in **Matthew 12**, the demanding leaders plot how they might destroy Him (**12:14**). The critical leaders are presented to the reader as characters who are “evil” (**12:23, 39, 45; 16:4**), spiritually blind (**12:24, 38, 42; 16:3**), hypocritical (**12:10**;

15:7; 16:10), conniving (**12:14**), murderous (**12:14**), unfaithful to God (**12:39; 16:4**), unrepentant (**12:41**), and lawless (**15:3, 6**). In addition to the above, Jesus also likens them to a man possessed by a demon (**12:43-45**); and they are also pictured as acting in a manner representative of Satan (**12:38; 16:1**). These are the ones who Jesus warned His disciples about in the Sermon on the Mount (**7:15**).

Development of the Conflict

In this second major section (**4:17—16:20**), part B (**11:2—16:20**), one witnesses the escalation of conflict. The following is a chronological listing of the various encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders:

- **12:1-8** Plucking Grain on the Sabbath
- **12:9-14** Healing of the Man with a Withered Hand
- **12:22-37** Healing Blind and Dumb Demoniac
- **12:38-45** Demand for a Sign
- **15:1-20** Eating with Defiled Hands
- **16:1-4** Second Demand for a Sign
- **16:5-12** The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

These seven encounters demonstrate the hatred that the religious leaders exhibited toward Jesus. Even with the miracles, they were not persuaded as to the true identity of Jesus. Part B of the second major section is about the repudiation of Jesus' ministry to Israel. As stated in the first major section (**1:1—4:16**), the identity of Jesus is presented with the climax in God's announcement of who Jesus really is: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (**3:17**).

Entwined with the motif of repudiation in **11:2—16:20** is also the speculation about the identity of Jesus. The questioning begins with John the Baptist: "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (**11:2-3**). Even the crowds question one another: "Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?'" (**12:22-23**).

CONFLICTING VIEWS ABOUT THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

As mentioned above, Matthew presented the various viewpoints about Jesus in **1:1—4:16**. But in this second part, one is also confronted even more pointedly than in the first part as to the identity of Jesus. It is significant that God in Part One (**4:1—4:16**), as well as in part two (**4:17—16:20**), breaks into the world of Matthew with His evaluative point of view about Jesus (**3:17; 17:5**). This identity of Jesus also permeates, in greater

detail, the third section (16:21—28:20). This identity is of such a controversial nature that Jesus even asked the disciples what people were saying about who the Son of Man is (16:13).

As a result of Jesus' widespread activity of teaching, preaching, and healing, His fame spreads throughout Palestine and even Syria (4:23-25; 9:36, 31, 33, 35; 11:2, 4; 13:54; 14:1). But in spite all of this fame, one still observes conflicting views about the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth. The reaction to Jesus is mixed. For example, the crowds follow Him (4:24-25; 8:1, 10; 9:33; 12:15; 13:2; 14:13; 15:30-31), but, on the other hand, the religious leaders place Him under scrutiny (9:3, 11, 34). In spite of His fame, in spite of His teaching, in spite of His preaching, and, in spite of His healing, nevertheless, Israel, as a whole, repudiates Him (11:2—12:50). The religious leaders and the crowds do not recognize His true identity.

Towns in Galilee

This conflict is not surprising to Matthew's readers because they had been forewarned (2:3; 3:7-12; 9:3, 11, 14, 34; 10:5-42). Jesus was amazed at the unbelief of so many in their rejection of Him. Jesus renounces the people for their turning away from John and especially Himself (11:16-19). Jesus issues condemnation on the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida (11:20-21), and Capernaum (11:23-24) for their unwillingness to be moved to repentance following His mighty miracles. Even the townspeople of Nazareth were astonished at the teaching of Jesus: "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him" (13:55-57a).

Herod Antipas

Herod Antipas, having heard news about Jesus, speculates about Him: "At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, 'This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him'" (14:1-2). Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, inherited Galilee and Perea as his kingdom. He is the one that had previously beheaded John the Baptist at the request of his wife's daughter Herodias (14:3-11). He did not possess the mind of God as to who Jesus really is.

Disciples of Jesus

But in contrast to all these, the disciples having been caught in a storm, watching Jesus walk on water, seeing Peter saved from drowning, and witnessing the calming of the sea (14:24-33), they all proclaimed: "Truly you are the Son of God." (14:33). This correct response is the answer to an earlier question that they had asked when Jesus calms a storm: "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (8:27). Matthew concludes this second major section with two evaluative points of view which he juxtaposes to each other in order to bring his story to a culmination—Peter's confession near Caesarea Philippi (16:13-20): "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). Peter's point of view is correct because it is in alignment with God's point of view (3:17; 16:23a). On the other hand, the evaluative viewpoint of the various

segments of the Jewish nation is that He is just one of the prophets (16:13-14).

In the second part (4:17—16:20), Matthew tells of Jesus' ministry to Israel (4:17—11:1) and of Israel's response to Him (11:2—16:20). Through His ministry, Jesus summons Israel to repentance and to live in the sphere of God's end-time rule (5:1—8:1). Despite His plea for restoration and acceptance of Himself as the Son of God, some charged Him with blasphemy (9:3). This section consists mainly of Jesus' teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23; 9:35; 11:1).

In the later part of Matthew's story, one observes a change (11:2—16:20). To all intents and purposes, Jesus' ministry is without success. In fact, Israel's response to His ministry is one of repudiation. The religious leaders attack Jesus Himself over the traditions of the elders and seek His life (12:1—8, 9—14; 15:1-9). The leaders dismiss Him outright as an agent of Satan (9:34; 12:24). The Jewish crowds look upon Him as another prophet (16:13-14).

In contrast to both the crowds and the leaders, the disciples confess Him to be the Messiah Son of God (16:16; 14:33). Still, despite the correctness of their confession, Jesus commands them to silence; they do not yet fully understand that the central task before Him is death upon a cross. Israel is ignorant as to who Jesus is, but the disciples know Him to be the Son of God. Jesus' ministry is without success, at least according to the religious leaders and the crowds. But, on the other hand, His ministry, in the sight of God, is successful because He accomplished redemption for the sins of the world.

THIRD MAJOR SECTION: 16:21—28:20

The Journey to Jerusalem

Matthew begins Section Three with Jesus' prediction about His ultimate fate (crucifixion) by the religious leaders. He writes, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matthew 16:21). One observes that in this explanation of His impending death, Jesus sets forth the concept that His death is necessary ("he must go" or "it is necessary," *dei*). God and Jesus intend this death for the salvation of all humanity (1:21), but, on the other hand, the religious leaders' objective is destruction (12:14). Matthew employs the passion-prediction as another literary device to give cohesion to the third part of his story. He records three references to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

Prior to these predictions, one recalls Peter's confession about Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (16:16). Following this confession, Jesus warned the disciples "not to tell anyone that he was the Christ." One reason for this silence was that the disciples still did not understand the full mission of Jesus. Again, following the transfiguration of Jesus, the three disciples—Peter, James, and John—were told: "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead" (17:9).

The disciples still did not understand that Jesus had to die for the sins of the world. After Jesus' first announcement about His death, Peter immediately rebuked Jesus:

“Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” (16:22). Peter still did not understand the atonement. Jesus then reprimanded Peter for not thinking the “things of God,” but rather the “things of men”: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (16:23). The readers of Matthew’s Gospel would naturally reflect upon Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness when Satan also sought to frustrate the scheme of God: “Away from me, Satan!” (4:10). Peter’s evaluative point of view did not coincide with that of God’s.

Subsequent to this rebuke by Jesus, one finds three of Jesus’ disciples with Him on the Mountain. In the transfiguration of Jesus, God gives His viewpoint concerning the identity of His Son and the necessity of the death of His Son. Earlier, it is recalled that God entered into the world as actor and gave His testimony. Matthew records this intervention: “And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” (3:17). In this second revelation of God’s point of view, He adds an additional statement: “Listen to him!” (17:5). On the way back to Jerusalem, as stated above, Jesus informs the disciples of His impending death (16:21), but Peter says “no” (16:22). But on the Mount, God says, “Listen to Him!” They were to listen to His warnings about His impending death (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

Following the confession of Peter in Caesarea Philippi and the Mount of Transfiguration scene, Jesus and His disciples enter Galilee. Upon entering this territory, Jesus for the second time tells them of His impending death: “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life” (17:22-23). One can still hear the echo of God’s voice: “Listen to Him!” They were to receive that which God had ordained—suffering and death in Jerusalem. Yet, the disciples still would not understand the implications of this death until after the resurrection: “As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’” (17:9). The disciples did not fully understand these events until Jesus met with them after the resurrection and explained the “things of God”:

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:44-48).

When Jesus completed His work in this area (Galilee), He started toward Jerusalem (Matthew 20:17). He took the disciples apart privately and, again for the third time explained the “things of God”: “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” (20:18-19).

From the border of Jericho, Jesus journeys in the direction of Jerusalem and arrives at the Mount of Olives (21:1). The events that now transpire are shrouded in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Israel receives Jesus into Jerusalem as the Son of David (21:9). When the inhabitants of Jerusalem inquired of the crowds as to who this Jesus is, the people replied: “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (21:11). This confession of the crowds is similar to the remarks of the disciples concerning the identity of Jesus as reported by the people: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” To the people, Jesus is no more than a prophet, even though they spoke of Him as the Son of David. Israel still did not understand God’s evaluative viewpoint about Jesus.

Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem marked the beginning of the end of His conflict with the religious leaders. His actions caused the religious leaders to engage Him in direct confrontation over His course of actions. Jesus attacked the seat of their power: “My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers’” (21:13). Jesus launches a massive assault upon their authority and integrity (21:12-13). This action paves the way for the thorny controversies with the religious leaders leading up to His crucifixion. As Jesus debates and speaks in parables, the tension between Him and the religious leaders reach a breaking point (21:12—23:39).

The confrontation with Jesus widens to the point that it includes representatives of all the groups in Jerusalem:

- Chief priests and the scribes (21:15)
- Chief priests and the elders of the people (21:23)
- The disciples of the Pharisees along with the Herodians (22:15-16)
- The Sadducees (22:23)
- A lawyer from the Pharisees (22:24-35)

Following these confrontational episodes, Jesus Himself closes the series by challenging the Pharisees:

“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” “The son of David,” they replied. He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, “‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions (22:42-46)

After Jesus silences the leaders in debate, then the religious leaders leave the scene of the temple. Alone with the crowds and the disciples, He delivers a piercing chastisement against the religiosity of the religious leaders. This scathing rebuke is reminiscent of His stern disapproval of the sanctimonious leaders in His Sermon on the Mount: “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).

Jesus begins His ministry with an analysis of their teachings and ends His ministry with another stinging condemnation of their ethical behavior. Jesus issues seven woes directed against their conduct (**chapter 23**). Following this indictment of the rigid leaders for their shallow display of piety, He then proceeds to speak of God's judgment upon the nation of Israel (**chapter 24**). This entire chapter is about God's eschatological judgment upon the nation, upon the unscrupulous shepherds, and upon the temple. He then speaks three parables—The Parable of the Ten Virgins, The Parable of the Talents, and The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats—against the over-bearing leaders of Israel for their pretense of virtue (**chapter 25**).

After concluding these three parables of judgment, Jesus again brings to the attention of His disciples the impending death that awaits Him by the chief priest and elders of the people (**26:1-5**). The leaders demonstrate their rejection of His parables by their plotting to put Him to death. The corrupt leaders rejected God's identity of Jesus Messiah as His Son (**3:17; 17:5**). Their evaluative viewpoint is not the "things of God," but rather, the "things of men."

Jesus now informs His disciples, after their request about the Passover, that it is time to prepare the Passover meal (**26:1**). It is during this meal that Jesus gives a glimmer of information as to what His death is all about: "Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (**26:27-28**). Following this Supper, the political machinery starts to roll in its intensity for His crucifixion. Immediately upon His arrest, He is taken before the Sanhedrin (**26:57-67**), before Pilate (**27:11-26**), and then the soldiers mock Jesus (**27:27-31**). Matthew then describes in accelerated movement the events of the crucifixion (**27:32-44**), the death of Jesus (**27:45-55**), the burial of Jesus (**27:57-66**), the resurrection of Jesus (**28:1-10**), the guards' report (**28:11-15**), and finally the instructions of Jesus to His disciples about making disciples (**28:16-20**).

CONCLUSION

The third major division of Matthew's Gospel (**16:21-28:20**) is honeycombed with confrontations with the religious leaders. Beginning with **Matthew 16:21**, one observes an escalation of the "powers that be" to get rid of Jesus. The religious leaders are so cunning in their attack against Jesus that even the crowds are taken in by their hypocrisy (**27:20**). No wonder Jesus warned His disciples on two different occasions to "Watch out for false prophets" (**Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24**). The first warning followed Jesus' rebuke of the religious leaders' theology (**Matthew 5—6**) and the second and third warnings occurred following His seven woes (**Matthew 23**) against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. The false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew refer, so it appears, to the religious leaders. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, He scrutinizes the unethical behavior of the leaders. Conflict with the leaders of Israel permeates the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

This essay has analyzed the three major divisions in the Gospel of Matthew. Throughout the three sections (**4:1—1:16; 4:17—16:20; 16:21—28:20**) of Matthew's Gospel, the identity of Jesus permeates all three divisions. In these three divisions, one observes that conflict abounds from the beginning to end. To begin with, Matthew foreshadows this disunity but in the ministry of John the Baptist, one observes direct confrontation. Jesus begins His ministry with an analysis of the religious leaders' concept of God's

righteousness, and He concludes His ministry with His analysis of the religious leaders' characteristics (**chapter 24 and 25**). The antagonism of the leaders of Israel against Jesus begins in the second major section. But in Part A one observes, not direct confrontation, but indirect confrontation. On the other hand, in Part B one observes an escalation of the quarrels with Jesus by the leaders—it is now direct. In the third major section (**16:21—28:20**), this animosity against Jesus reaches its climax on the part of the leaders in the crucifixion of Jesus.

[1] Mark Allen Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 99.

[2] See Ronald David Witherup, “The Cross of Jesus: A Literary-Critical Study of Matthew 27,” (Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1985), 56, where he comments on an important methodology of literary criticism.

Contemporary literary criticism accepts the object of its study as literature in and of itself, not as a means to an end. As opposed to the other Biblical criticisms, there is no intention to look behind the text to discern history or sources. Literary criticism looks at a text, rather than through it. To use Murray Krieger’s apt metaphor, the text is to be viewed not as a “window” through which one looks to discern what is on the other side; rather, it is a “Mirror” and the meaning of the text is thus on “this side” of the reading experience.

[3] Ibid., 95.

[4] Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24.

[5] John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1987), 75.

[6] Powell, *Criticism*, 1-10.

[7] Ibid., 7.

[8] Ibid.

[9] See “The Present Crisis Within the Churches of Christ” (part 2 of 4 in this series) for examples of not applying the principles of literary analysis in seeking to comprehend the false prophets passages in Matthew 7:14; 24:11, 24. As a result of this loose interpretation by many Christians, each division within the Churches of Christ claims the false prophets citations as their own exclusive ticket to defend their separation from other Christians.

[10] See M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), 269, where he says,

Iser distinguishes between the “implied reader,” who is established by the text itself as one who

will respond in specific ways to the “response-inviting structures” of the text, and the “actual reader,” whose responses are inevitably colored by his or her accumulated private experiences.

[11] An example of this distinction is found in my article on The Passover Traditions in the First Century—where the *real reader* goes to outside sources to discover what the *implied reader* already knows about the Passover traditions in the first century [ON-LINE—available from <http://www.freedominchrist.net> (accessed 24 June 2004), located under caption SERMONS AND ESSAYS, and then under the subheading LORD’S SUPPER. See also Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism*, 19-21.

[12] Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 149-150; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974); David Robert Bauer, “The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel: A Literary-Critical Examination,” (Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1985), 24-26; Dorothy Jean Weaver, “The Missionary Discourse in the Gospel of Matthew: A Literary Critical Analysis,” (Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1987), 66.

[13] See W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), where he counsels Christians not to reject literary criticism.

Religious thinkers should be sympathetic to criticism because it is a branch of philosophy; it is an effort to get at certain truths about signs, knowledge, and reality. If these remarks seem at all platitudinous, let me add that I have taken the trouble to make them because it seems to me possible for the thought and scholarship of religious persons (especially in America today) to be too far sold in the cultivation of certain merely historical, informational, and neutral techniques. This may have been for a time a necessary phase of competition with secular science and secular education. But there is no reason why Christians should be the last (or even be slow) to transcend the limitations of such knowledge, to outgrow pedantic misconceptions and participate in literary philosophy.

[14] See Witherup, “Cross of Jesus,” 120, 139.

[15] Chatman, *Story*, 19-27.

[16] *Ibid.*, 19.

[17] Jack Kingsbury, *Matthew As Story*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 3.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] See also Bauer, “The Cross of Jesus,” 62.

[20] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1927), 30.

[21] Chatman, *Story*, 19, 26.

[22] Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch, "Plot" in *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Chicago: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Company, 1997), 167.

[23] See Dorothy Jean Weaver, "The Missionary Discourse in the Gospel of Matthew: A Literary Critical Analysis," (Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1987), where she summarizes quite succinctly the story, plot and setting: "This story can be viewed in terms of three basic elements: characters (the actors in the story), plot (the sequence of events within the story), and setting (the designated location or surroundings within which any given event of the story takes place).

[24] Forster, *Novel*, 86.

[25] See Bauer, "Structure," 26, where he comments on "plot":

Another aspect of literary criticism which has received a great deal of attention lately is the "plot." Put succinctly, the plot is the arrangement of incidents within the narrative, considered in light of their relations to one another. A distinction is usually made between the arrangement of events in the narrative time and that in the story time to which the narrative refers. The narrative may include such devices as flash back or foreshadowing, forcing the readers to place the incidents thus described in their proper temporal position within the story.

[26] See also Morner and Rausch, *NTC's Dictionary*, 168.

[27] Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Story*, 43.

[28] *Ibid.*, 34.

[29] Powell, *Criticism*, 23; See also Weaver, "Discourse," 67.

[30] For an excellent treatment of the various evaluative points of view in Matthew's Gospel, see Kingsbury, *Story*, 1988), 33-37; Morner and Rausch, *NTC's Dictionary*, "Point of View," 170-171; M. H. Abrams, "Point of View," *Literary Terms*, 165-169. See also Mark Allen Powell, "The Religious Leaders in Matthew: A Literary-Critical Approach," (Ph., D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1988), 176-184.

[31] See Witherup, "Cross of Jesus," 76-86; Weaver, "Discourse," 68-100; Kingsbury, *Story*, 33-42.

[32] Powell, "Leaders," 184.

[33] I am indebted to Kingsbury's book, *Matthew as Story*, for calling my attention to this threefold structure. This overview of Matthew's structure follows the development by Kingsbury. See also Powell, "Leaders," 39-41; Witherup, "Cross of Jesus," 112-150; David Robert Bauer, "The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Literary-Critical

Examination,” (Ph. D. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1985).

^[34] Kingsbury, *Story*, 43-58.

^[35] This second section may be further divided into two subdivisions: (1) Ministry of Jesus to Israel [4:17—11:1]; and (2) Israel’s repudiation of Jesus [11:2—16:20]; Witherup, *The Cross of Jesus*, 34; Bauer, “Structure,” 185.

^[36] Kingsbury, *Story*, 77-93.

^[37] For an analysis of the structure of Matthew, see Witherup, “Cross of Jesus,” 142, 152.

^[38] Witherup, “Cross of Jesus,” 89.

^[39] Weaver, “Discourse,” 62.

^[40] Kingsbury, *Story*, 98.

^[41] For an excellent commentary on God entering the world as actor, see Weaver, “Discourse,” 90; Witherup, “Cross of Jesus,” 124.

^[42] See Kingsbury, *Story*, 35.

^[43] “When Abram was ninety nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.’ Abram fell face down, and God said to him, ‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God’” ([Genesis 17:1-8](#)).

^[44] See Kingsbury, *Story*, 48-49.

^[45] See Kingsbury, *Story*, 49-51, for an insightful analysis of the Baptist’s point of view.

^[46] See Kingsbury, *Story*, 59-76.

^[47] For a detailed study of the Old Testament and its relevance, see Dallas Burdette, “The Authority of the Old Testament: A Brief Summary of the Relevance of the Old Testament within the Christian Community” [ON-LINE]. Available from <http://www.freedominchrist.net> [accessed 7 July 2004], located under caption BIBLICAL

STUDIES and then under the subheading MISAPPLIED SCRIPTURES.

^[48] Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Story*,

^[49] Powell, “Leaders,” 217.

^[50] Ibid.